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CAMP

DOWN TIME: A few boys felt like reading instead of swimming; Demani and Luis are with Stephan Lockwood their counselor. Campers have the use of two pools while at Camp Wing. Photo by Karen Wong

Touching lives at Camp Wing



TOUR GUIDES: Deonte, 10 and Zoie, 11, show a guest around Camp Wing last week.

The music is blasting at lunch time in the dining hall at Camp Wing. Food is carried through a maze of tables, but it's hard to avoid the people dancing on the chairs and singing along to the music, performing choreographed moves to the delight of their friends.

And that's just the counselors.

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Lunch time is one of the highlights of the day at Crossroads for Kids, the organization that runs summer camps for at-risk youth all through the summer. As Executive Director Deb Samuels describes it, lunch used to be a chaotic time at the camp. Most of the kids are well-behaved during the day, but when 200-plus gather for lunch, it's tough to keep things under control.

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One day, Camp Director Pat Cleary started to play music through two large speakers at the front of the dining hall. The kids immediately started dancing and singing along. Although Samuels concedes "there's not a lot of etiquette being taught," she said lunch is now one of the most looked-forward to parts of the day.

"It creates this incredible sprit of energy," she said. "It transformed what was a challenge into something that is unique to Crossroads."

It's an amusing sight to behold, but it also underscores Crossroads for Kids' mission: to let kids know they're in a safe environment, and it's OK to be themselves.

'Like a family'

Deonte, 10, has been coming to Crossroads for years. His mother was actually a camper years ago, heading down to Duxbury with a cousin that wanted to attend but was too nervous to go by herself. The cousin eventually went home, but Deonte's mother stayed and fell in love with the rural setting. Both Deonte and his older brother, Khamari, 13, are repeat campers.

The big attraction for Deonte, who is from Dorchester but attends school in Marblehead through the METCO program, is how comfortable he is at Camp Wing.

"I like how safe an environment it is," he said. He also

feels that since many counselors were campers themselves it helps establish a bond.

"If you're in a struggle they'll help you understand why," he said.

Khamari feels the same way about the camp's staff.

"As you get to know everyone ... you get to grow like a family," he said.

Of course, the idyllic setting of Camp Wing, 100 acres of forest, playing fields, ponds and nature trails off Keene Street, helps draw the normally city-dwelling children back year after year.

"I don't have a climbing wall in my backyard," points out Khamari.

Deonte and Zoie, 11, are members of the Camper Continuity Initiative, a four-year program that extends the Crossroads experience year round with things like retreats and camping trips.

"It's like a year-round Camp Wing," Deonte said.

Samuels said the CCI program is designed to help nurture the younger campers into Crossroads' teen leadership program, called C5.

"We're learning to be role models to other kids," said Zoie.

Crossroads' goal is to keep the campers, who can start coming to camp as early as age seven, in the fold and in C5. The kids in C5 have a 100 percent graduation rate, Samuels said, and 95 percent go to college.

"It's all about changing the odds," she said.

Summer days in Duxbury

Deonte and Khamari stay in the boys' section of the camp, a loose collection of cabins near the camp's entrance that's separated into a junior (ages 7-10, denoted by the red doors on the cabins) and senior (11 and up, marked by green cabin doors) area. There are two staff members and 8-9 participants to a cabin, and the campers do most of their activities in a team with the cabin mates. For example, Deonte's cabin, Olympus, will travel to activities and meals together, and they are also responsible for cleaning the bathroom. This is done every morning as part of "community service" time.

The female campers stay across the Camp Wing property in a reproduction of a colonial fort called "the Stockade." Camp Wing was originally two separate entities, Camp Wing and the Duxbury Stockade. The legend is, as Samuels tells it, that there are no nails in any of the stockade's large timbers, it's all built using period construction techniques.

A typical campers' day begins with community service, which can be anything from cleaning the bathroom to picking up around the cabin area, and throughout the day the kids participate in various sports and games, or swimming at the camp's two pools. There's an Outward Bound-esque ropes course, where campers learn teamwork and how to trust each other, and there is also boating on the small lake behind the dining hall.

After dinner, there is "program time," where the campers learn arts and crafts or try their hands at performing arts like music and drama. Crossroads has partnerships with the Duxbury Bar Maritime School, which runs a sailing program, and the Art Complex Museum, and this year they are working

with South Shore Conservatory on music lessons.

While the campers do everything in their teams, much of the day is unstructured by design.

"The great thing about overnight camp is there's no urgency," said Samuels. "We're not trying to squeeze a million things into a day."

One of the favorites at Camp Wing is "whoop-de-do," where campers are free to choose their own activities.

Each day has a holiday theme, and these can range from Valentine's Day to Chinese New Year to International Talk Like a Pirate Day. The decorations from each theme are left up in the dining hall, so by the end of the summer, it's quite a visual scene.

Camp Wing has three ses-

sions, two for 20 days and one for 14 days. Campers are usually encouraged to sign up for two sessions, but some campers stay all summer, like Tynigel, 12. Tynigel was originally worried he'd be bored camping in Duxbury, but has fallen in love with camp.

"I'm just being 12 and having fun," he said.

Encouraging young leaders

Crossroads for Kids was founded in 1936 by Arthur Taylor Burger, executive director of Boys Clubs of Boston, and other Boys Clubs Trustees and prominent business men under the name Boys and Girls Camps. The goal was to provide children living in the Boston Metro area with the opportunity to enjoy a camp experience and the associated benefits and character

development of an intentional residential camp experience, according to the group's Web site. This year is the 75th anniversary of Crossroads.

Camp Wing hosts about 220 kids in their overnight program. (They have a separate day camp that includes about 200 kids, mostly from Duxbury and local towns.) About 60 percent of the kids come from Boston, specifically Dorchester, but they come from as far away as Brockton, Medford, Cambridge, Quincy, Plymouth. Many of the campers are referred from schools, or social agencies.

There are also two other camps run by Crossroads, Camp Mitton in Brewster, which has a smaller group of campers and caters to students who need more one-on-one attention, and Camp Lapham in Ashby, where the initiative runs its teen leadership program.

Khamari is in the leadership program while still a senior camper at Camp Wing. He's currently working on a recycling project.

"We do our own projects," he said. "You get to set your own goals for the future ... It teaches you to be a good leader and how to prepare yourself for the world."

Fidelis, 18, was a camper with Crossroads and is now a counselor after going through C5. He said the counselors he camped with inspired him to give back to the organization.

"Going through the teen program, the way counselors treated me, I wanted to treat kids the same way," he said. "After a few days you say, 'I can trust this person.'"

Fidelis is headed to the Art Institute after high school, something he said he's not sure would have happened without Crossroads.

"C5 helps you grow up," he said.

From survival to success

At the end of the summer, a visitor to Camp Wing might only see children having fun, splashing in the pool or playing soccer in the fields, and

forget the reason many of the campers are there. Samuels said that the backgrounds of the campers run the gamut from those whose challenges are merely financial (the camp asks for a family contribution but will not turn kids away) to those who come from troubled homes or who deal with difficult situations like gang violence.

"It's definitely not a quick fix," she said. "When they come here a lot of them are so shut down they're in survival mode."

However, after a few days, she sees most of the campers open up when they begin to realize they are in a safe place.

"It's a completely different environment; they don't have to protect themselves anymore," she said. "They are confident, they believe in themselves."

The attitude of the adults at Camp Wing is that of respect for the campers. Rather than treating them like military cadets, shuffling groups from activity to activity in an overly-structured setting, counselors rely on the campers themselves to provide leadership.

"We start with high expect-

tations," Samuels said. "It's all part of building that sense of respect and self-management ... It's a long term impact and it's transformational."

The fact that most campers come back year after year, and many return as counselors, helps the young men and women know that they have support.

"When they're facing a tough moment nine times out of 10 we're going to be the ones they call," Samuels said.

Fidelis summed up the impact Crossroads has had on him in one simple sentence: "It becomes your whole life."

"It's a completely different environment; they don't have to protect themselves anymore ... They are confident, they believe in themselves."

— Deb Samuels, Executive Director



Camp Wing Residential Camp Director Patrick Cleary and the Director of Crossroads Program Developer Joanne Fay are surrounded by adoring campers and counselors.

Crossroads nurtures young leaders at camp



The Junior Girls Village Egg Toss provided lots of laughs. On left, Ava, Kayla, Promise and Helena. On right, Victoria, Michelle, Deanna, Kirce and Bianca.

Photo by Karen Wong